2026 SAME SBC Booth Battle

1. Purpose & Objectives

The SBC Booth Battle is organized and run by the Exhibitor Advisory Committee (EAC), part of the Small Business Council. The competition is designed to elevate attendee experience at the SAME Small Business Conference by rewarding innovation, creativity, and meaningful engagement. This competition shifts the focus from money spent on booth design to the value created for attendees through interaction, ideas, and connection.

Our objectives are to:

- **Encourage Engagement**: Inspire exhibitors to move beyond static displays and create memorable, interactive experiences.
- **Level the Playing Field**: Ensure both large firms and first-time small businesses have an equal opportunity to showcase their value and be recognized.
- **Enhance Attendee Experience**: Make the exhibit hall a dynamic, high-energy hub where attendees gain knowledge, build relationships, and actively participate.
- **Strengthen Community**: Highlight how exhibitors of all sizes contribute to SAME's mission of supporting the federal A/E/C community.
- **Create Legacy**: Build an annual tradition that celebrates creativity and engagement, establishing a "Hall of Fame" that sets the standard for future SBCs.

2. Competition Overview

The SBC Booth Battle was born out of the SAME Small Business Council's vision to spotlight exhibitors who create booth experiences that people keep talking about it. It's not about who spends the most money or builds the best structure, it's about who delivers the most engaging, memorable, and creative experience for attendees on the exhibit floor.

The inaugural contest launched at SBC 2024 in New Orleans, LA, where the first winners set the bar high:

- Small Business Winner: FFE
- Medium Business Winner: Freese and Nichols
- Large Business Winner: Tetra Tech

All exhibitors are automatically included and eligible to participate. From first-time small businesses with a single table to international firms with expansive displays, everyone

has the opportunity to shine. Booth designs are part of the picture, but it's not the whole story, engagement, creativity, and attendee experience are what matter most.

3. Categories & Awards

Each year, the SBC Booth Battle presents four awards. Three honor the best booths by company size, ensuring every exhibitor competes in an equal weight class. The fourth award is the Feature Award, a rotating spotlight chosen annually by the EAC to keep the competition fresh and push exhibitors to think outside the box. Together, these four awards celebrate not only design but also engagement, creativity, and the moments that make the SBC exhibit hall come alive.

Awards

- **Small Business**: Firms with 0-100 employees. Celebrating small businesses that prove that size doesn't limit impact.
- **Medium Business**: Firms with 101-2,000 employees. Recognizing mid-sized companies that bridge scale and creativity to leave a lasting impact.
- **Large Business**: Firms with 2,001+ employees. Honoring organizations that prove leadership isn't about footprint, it's about impact.
- **Feature Award**: Open to all firms. Dedicated to a rotating secondary award based on exhibiting creativity and innovation, chosen each year by the EAC.

The Feature Award

The Feature Award is the competition's wild card, a rotating category chosen each year by the EAC. One year it may spotlight Best Engagement Activity, the next Best Giveaway, Best Demonstration, or even Best First-Time Exhibitor. By changing the focus annually, the Feature Award keeps the competition dynamic, challenges exhibitors to innovate, and ensures that new ideas always have their moment in the spotlight.

Prizes & Recognition

Winners receive:

- **Free Conference Registration**: One full-conference complimentary registration, redeemable at any SAME National Conference for the following calendar year.
- **Lottery Advantage**: First-day booth lottery appointment alongside SAME partners and sponsors for the following year's SBC, giving your firm prime access to select booth space early.
- **Floor Sticker**: A custom floor decal placed in front of your booth at the following year's SBC, celebrating your winning status and drawing extra attention to your firm.

- **Program Highlight**: Premium exhibitor listing in next year's SBC program, including your firm's logo, brief description, and a colorful background noting your previous Booth Battle award to attendees before they step onto the exhibit floor.
- **Visibility**: Recognition in SAME's recap article in The Military Engineer, on SAME's social media channels, and in event promotions highlighting the year's winners.
- Hall of Fame: Immortalized in SAME's official Flickr Exhibit Hall of Fame, a permanent photo archive featuring your booth and team, celebrating the creativity and energy that set your firm apart.
- **Bragging Rights**: Featured spotlight photos and live shoutouts during SBC to celebrate your creativity, engagement, and energy.
- **Judge's Invitation**: An exclusive invitation to serve as a judge in the following year's SBC Booth Battle, sharing insights and continuing the legacy of excellence.

2026 Feature Award: Best Booth Innovation

In the spirit of this year's theme, **"Fueling Federal Acquisition"** this year's Feature Award celebrates exhibitors who brings something fresh, unexpected, or boldly creative to the exhibit floor. Whether through a surprising experience, standout branding, compelling signage, clever use of technology, or a design that stops attendees in their tracks. This award celebrates the booth that made us say *"I've never seen that at SBC before!"*

Evaluation Criteria (Applied to the Feature Award)

- **Surprise & Originality (50%)**
  Does this booth do something you haven't seen before at SBC? Judges will look for a genuine "wow" moment, something that stops attendees in their tracks, challenges expectations, or reimagines what a booth presence can be. Size and budget are not the measure; boldness and originality are, expressed in a way that is fresh, deliberate, and unmistakably yours.

- **Creativity & Execution (30%)**
  Is the innovative idea well-executed and cohesive? Judges will evaluate whether the concept is carried through with intention and craft, from the visual design and messaging to the overall experience it creates on the exhibit hall show floor.

- **Relevance & Impact (20%)**
  Does the innovation connect meaningfully to the firm's identity, capabilities, or the federal mission? A bold idea that also tells a clear story about who you are and what you do will stand out.

Quick Start Ideas

- Redesign your booth layout to create a flow or journey, rather than a static display, that draws attendees through your space.
- Use bold, unexpected signage or messaging that challenges assumptions about your firm or sparks curiosity from across the aisle.
- Incorporate technology in a creative way, interactive screens, AR/VR demonstrations, live data visualizations, or digital capability briefs.
- Build a visual theme or immersive environment that reflects your firm's brand and federal mission in a way that's immediately recognizable and memorable.
- Introduce a surprising prop, installation, or hands-on element that creates a natural stopping point and conversation moment.
- Ditch the standard banner-and-table setup entirely and design something that looks unlike anything else on the show floor.

4. Evaluation Criteria

Judges will be looking for booths that transform their space into an experience. Exhibitors will be evaluated on the following criteria:

- **Engagement & Interaction (40%)**: Does the booth draw people in? Are staff approachable, interactive, and actively connecting with attendees? Are visitors walking away with a memorable exchange, not just a handout?
- **Creativity & Design (30%)**: Is the booth visually distinct and creatively designed? Does it break away from the “table + banner” mold to create something fresh and inviting?
- **Relevance & Storytelling (20%)**: Does the booth clearly communicate the company’s story and how it supports the SAME mission and the federal A/E/C marketplace? Is there a clear connection between the booth experience and the exhibitor’s value to attendees?
- **Memorability & Impact (10%)**: Will attendees still be talking about this booth after they leave? Did the booth leave a positive, lasting impression that stood out from the crowd?

<u>Feature Award</u>

While the focus of the feature award rotates, the evaluation criteria will remain simple, flexible, and tailored to the chosen theme. The award will be judged using three consistent criteria:

- **Alignment with Theme (50%)**: How well does the exhibitor interpret and deliver on the spirit of the year’s Feature Award? Judges will evaluate how clearly your effort connects to the theme, whether that’s in-booth engagement, online

participation, creative promotion, or audience interaction before, during, or after SBC.

- **Creativity & Innovation (30%)**: Did the exhibitor bring something fresh, bold, or unexpected to the competition? Judges will look for originality, creative use of technology, storytelling, visuals, or audience interaction that sets your approach apart.
- **Reach & Impact (20%)**: How effectively did the exhibitor capture attention and inspire engagement? This can include measurable impact (e.g., audience participation or attendee buzz), as well as the experience's memorability and shareability.

5. Rules & Eligibility

The SBC Booth Battle is designed to be fun, fair, and focused on creating an unforgettable SBC exhibit hall experience. To keep things on level ground, there are a few simple rules every exhibitor agrees to by stepping onto the floor:

- **Everyone's In**: All SBC exhibitors are automatically part of the competition. No sign-up, no extra steps, just show up ready to stand out.
- **Game Time Ready**: Booths must be fully set up and ready when the exhibit hall opens.
- **No Early Exits**: Booths may not begin breaking down until the official announcement is made at 12:31 PM local time. Breaking down early is an automatic disqualification, period.
- **Always On**: Booths must be staffed during official exhibit hall hours. An empty booth can't engage anyone, and engagement is what this contest is all about.
- **Stay Engaged**: Exhibitors who signal "do not disturb", sitting behind tables with laptops open, wearing over-the-ear headphones, or any similar behavior, are not living up to the spirit of this competition. The SBC Booth Battle is about energy, connection, and presence. Judges are not required to evaluate or score disengaged exhibitors.
- **Play Fair**: Scores must be earned the right way: through energy, creativity, and connection. Trying to game the system, whether that's bribing a judge with swag, food, or free drink tickets, is strictly out of bounds.
- **Bring the Right Vibe**: Exhibitors are expected to engage with attendees, judges, and fellow exhibitors with professionalism and respect.
- **Keep It Neutral**: If a judge's firm is an exhibitor, the judge will not be allowed to judge the aisle in which their firm is located. This keeps the contest fair for all.
- **Three-Year Rule:** Firms that win any SBC Booth Battle award (Small, Medium, Large, or Feature) are not eligible to win another award for three years. This rule ensures new exhibitors have an opportunity to be recognized and keeps the competition fresh and competitive each year.

6. Judging

The SBC Booth Battle is all about energy, creativity, and connection. Judging is not about quietly checking boxes; it's about experiencing the exhibit hall the same way attendees do and recognizing the booths that bring it to life.

<u>EAC Judges</u>

- **EAC Volunteers**: A panel of industry-savvy peers who know what it takes to make an engaging booth work. Judges will roam the floor incognito, experiencing booths the same way attendees do.
- **Coverage by Zone**: Each judge will be assigned a specific section of the exhibition hall to evaluate, ensuring every booth gets attention.
- **Consistent Standards**: Judges will evaluate booths based on the published criteria, ensuring a fair, transparent process.

<u>EAC Judging Process</u>

1. **Zone Assignments (Pre-SBC)**: Prior to the conference, the EAC will divide the exhibit hall into zones of similar size based on the aisle layouts. The number of zones will determine the number of volunteer judges needed. Each judge will be assigned to one zone, ensuring that every booth in the hall is covered.
    - *For 2025, the exhibit hall has 16 aisles. Eight zones are ideal, with two aisles per zone.*
2. **Scoring Tools**: SAME will provide each judge with a printed spreadsheet of exhibiting firms organized by booth number within their assigned zone. The spreadsheet will include scoring columns for both Booth Battle and the Feature Award scoring.

    Booth Battle Scoring
    - Engagement & Interaction: 40 possible points
    - Creativity & Design: 30 possible points
    - Relevance & Storytelling: 20 possible points
    - Memorability & Impact: 10 possible points
    - Total Battle Score: 100 points

    Feature Award Scoring
    - Alignment with Theme: 50 possible points
    - Creativity & Innovation: 30 possible points
    - Attendee Response: 20 possible points
    - Total Feature Award Score: 100 points
3. **Tallying the Scores**: Judges submit their completed scorecards, and the EAC Chair tallies results.
4. **Tie Breaker**: In the event of a tie, the EAC Chair will personally score the tied booths and declare the winner.

Attendee Choice Voting

An electronic voting feature will also be available to give attendees a voice in celebrating the booths that best capture the energy, creativity, and engagement of the exhibit hall. This process will encourage broader participation and will allow EAC judges to consider attendee feedback as part of their overall evaluation, helping identify the booths that truly connect with the SBC community.

Attendees will be able to scan a QR code in the exhibit hall to access a digital ballot. There will also be a link in the SAME Events App to vote. Voting results will be used by the EAC judges as a supplemental input, not a replacement, to their formal scoring and analysis.

To maintain fairness and integrity:

- Each voter must enter their email address when casting a vote to prevent exhibitors from voting for their own booth.
- Each attendee may submit only one vote.
- All votes must be submitted by 4:30 PM local time on Day 2.

More information about how to participate in attendee voting will be provided on-site.

Timeline

- Day 1 (Exhibit Hall Opens): Judging begins.
- Day 2 (1:00 PM local time): Judging and electronic voting ends; completed judging scorecards are submitted to the SAME booth in the exhibit hall.
- Day 2 (5:00 PM local time): Winners are announced live in the exhibit hall, giving winning firms time to enjoy the spotlight for the remainder of SBC.
- Day 2 (5:30 PM local time): Official photos of the winning booths.
    - Two photos will be captured for each winner:
        1. **Booth Showcase**: An empty booth photo highlighting design, layout, and organization, a source of inspiration for future exhibitors.
        2. **Team Spotlight**: A photo featuring the winning firm's booth team, the people whose energy, creativity, and engagement made the booth stand out.
- Day 3 (12:29 PM local time, Exhibit Hall Close): Any winner packing up before the official closing announcement is automatically disqualified.

7. Marketing & Communications Plan

Goals

- Build awareness and excitement around the competition before SBC.
- Drive high exhibitor participation (remind them they're automatically entered).
- Celebrate winners in a way that extends visibility after SBC ends.

Audience & Channels

- Post contest outline on the SBC website.
- Direct email from SAME (official announcement and program outline).
- Exhibitor newsletters.
- Social media (SAME's LinkedIn, X, etc. channels).
- Post-event recognition in *The Military Engineer* and SAME national newsletters.
- The Hall of Fame archive on the SBC website.

Key Communication Touchpoints

Pre-Event (3–6 months out)

- Game On: "Your booth is already in the game; the competition is on!"
- Social Media Countdown: Share teaser graphics ("Who will stand out at SBC 2025?").
- Flyer Refresh: Update last year's flyer with 2025 rules, prizes, and new incentive (early booth lottery selection).

On-Site (during SBC)

- Social Media Push: Encourage exhibitors to share their booth on LinkedIn with the SBC hashtag.

Awards & Recognition (end of SBC)

- On-Site Announcement: Winners revealed on the afternoon of Day 2 in the exhibit hall.
- Social Media Blast: Photos and tags of winners.
- Recap Article: Recognition in *The Military Engineer* and SAME recap comms.
- Prize Highlight: Stress the new incentive, early access to next year's booth lottery (huge exhibitor value).

Post-Event

- Hall of Fame Page: Archive with photos, booth strategies, and winners listed annually.

Messaging Hooks

- Awareness / Announcement (emails, flyers)
    - "You're Already Entered, Now Bring Your Best!"
    - "Every Booth is in the Competition. Only the Bold Will Win."

- Engagement / Experience Focus (social media posts, daily pushes)
    - “Don’t Just Show Up. Stand Out.”
    - “Engage. Connect. Be Remembered.”
    - “This Isn’t About Backdrops, It’s About Buzz.”
- Provocation / Challenge (signage in the hall, hype content)
    - “Break the Booth. Build the Buzz.”
    - “Safe is Boring. Different Wins.”
    - “Your Booth Isn’t a Space. It’s a Stage.”
    - “Stop Giving Out Pens. Start Creating Moments.”
    - “Stand Out or Stand Aside.”

<u>Committee Action Items</u>

- Finalize flyer update and design new social/graphics/templates.
- Coordinate with SAME on email send schedule.
- Draft social content calendar (pre-event teasers, live winner reveal).
- Identify exhibit floor zones and number of volunteer judges needed.

8. Long-Term Vision

The SBC Booth Battle is to become a signature tradition of the SAME Small Business Conference, the moment every exhibitor looks forward to, plans for, and competes in. This isn’t just about a trophy; it’s about standing out, making connections, and leaving a mark on the SBC community.

Looking ahead, the competition will:

- **Raise the Bar**: Redefine what it means to exhibit by shifting the focus from static displays to interactive, can’t-miss experiences.
- **Build a Legacy**: Create an SBC Exhibit Hall of Fame, where each year’s winners inspire the next generation of booths.
- **Level the Playing Field**: Give every exhibitor, from first timers with a tabletop to global firms with island booths, a shot at recognition through creativity and engagement, not budget.
- **Supercharge SBC’s Energy**: Make the exhibit hall one of the most exciting, talked-about expo floors in the federal A/E/C community.
- **Keep Innovation Rolling**: Challenge exhibitors to bring fresh ideas, bold designs, and inventive ways to engage attendees year after year.

In short: SBC isn’t just where you show up, it’s where you stand out!